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Action Learning, Archiving and Avant-Garde Theatre

Revised Submission #125

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This paper outlines a project in which BA Drama students are collaborating to produce a multimedia archive of their research, preparation and presentation of an experimental theatre production. The students worked with an avant-garde theatre director to collectively create a theatrical work, performed in May 2012. Students are engaged in this project on three levels: in performance roles; in production roles; and in digital archiving roles. It is the last of these that forms the focus of this paper.

The impetus for the digital archiving aspect of this project is threefold. Firstly, following ideas suggested by professional practitioners the project aims to introduce students to the idea of digital archiving as part of their professional practice - effectively extending the performance into the virtual space. Secondly, the digital archiving aspect of the project will enhance levels of digital literacy by introducing students to new web technologies, and issues of professional self-presentation on the web. Thirdly, by documenting the creative processes the students will be producing materials that will be used to support their critical reflections after the final performance. Although some of the resources in the website will feed in to individual portfolios, the collaborative nature of this archive also closely mirrors the group learning processes necessary to the creation and delivery of the performance.

The digital archive is based around a shared Google account, and the use of Google tools to draw together a range of materials for archive and dissemination. The students work in groups focusing on different elements of the production. These groups create and upload material to GoogleDocs, Picasa, YouTube, and Blogger. A selection of these archived materials are then drawn together to form a project website using Google Sites. During the creation phase all materials are viewable only to the project participants, who act as co-owners of the archives. On completion of the project, the site will be finalised and become open to public viewing, forming an artefact that becomes a trace of the performance as well as evidencing the work of the students involved.

Google was chosen as the tool for this project because it aligned with our goals of greater student autonomy and ownership, allowing students complete creative control while emphasising that the created site will be a publicly available resource - 'policing' of content was therefore based on collective decisions by the students. It

also allowed us to train students on simple web and multimedia tools that they could use freely both during their studies and in their professional lives.

The project parameters and outcomes were set by academic staff and learning technologists, but this was very much a student led project, using multimedia technologies to engage students via an action learning (Peder, 1997), or expansive learning (Engestrom, 2001) approach.

At the halfway stage, with the performance completed, students are demonstrating high levels of engagement in collecting materials and building the archive, and are being very well supported by a member of academic staff. Their groupwork and digital literacy skills are developing, along with awareness of their online, as well as physical, audience.

Detailed evaluation of the project is ongoing, including assessment of students' contributions and teamwork, as well as gathering feedback through e-surveys and video interviews with students and staff.

References:

Engestrom, Y. (2001) 'Expansive Learning at Work: toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization', *Journal of Education and Work*, vol.14, no.1, pp.133-156.

Peder, M. (1997) *Action Learning in Practice*, 3rd Edition. Gower: Hampshire.

For examples of digital archiving of performance, see Triangle Theatre's project websites: <http://www.lastwomen.co.uk>, and; <http://www.ninaandfrederick.co.uk/pollard/>